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They entered the great hall, where all the special guests had assembled. The Mer-King and his mermaid daughters sat in tubs full of water; they felt quite at home, they said. Everyone was on best behaviour – with two exceptions: those Norwegian teenage trolls.

They started by putting their feet on the table.

"Take your feet out of the dishes!" shouted their father.

They obeyed, but took their time over it. Then they tickled their dinner partners – two elf-ladies – with pine cones. After that, they pulled off their boots to be more comfortable.

But the old troll was entirely different. He began to tell wonderful tales of the great Norwegian mountains and rushing waterfalls that sped down the cliffs with a sound like thunder. He spoke of the salmon that leapt in the racing torrent, while the water-sprite played its golden harp. He told of glittering winter nights, when the air was filled with jingling sleigh bells, and the young folk, carrying blazing torches, skated over the shining ice, which was so clear, so transparent that you could see the fishes fleeing in fear below.

Suddenly he stopped, and gave an elderly elfin lady a smacking kiss. They were complete strangers – but did that matter?





Now it was time for the elf-girls' display. They began with quite a simple dance, then changed to the stamping beat that they had been practising – what a treat! They ended with a strange free-style performance called "Breaking the Rules". Goodness, what twirling and twisting! Just watching it made you giddy. The hell-horse felt quite faint and had to leave the table.

"Whew!" said the old troll. "That was something! But can they do anything else?"

"They certainly can – as you shall see," said the Elf-King.

He called for his youngest daughter. She was small and slight, fair as moonshine – the most delicate of the sisters. She put a white sliver of wood in her mouth – and vanished! That was her special gift.

"Hmmm," said the old troll. He didn't want a wife with that particular trick.

The second sister could walk beside herself, so that she seemed to have a shadow. As you know, trolls and elves don't go in for shadows.

The third was a very different character. Besides being a fine brewer of beer, she knew how to decorate alder-stumps with glow-worms.

"She'd make a good housewife," said the old troll.

Now it was the fourth sister's turn. She was a harp player. When she plucked the first string, they all lifted their left leg. When she plucked the second string, they all had to do what she told them.

"She's a dangerous woman!" said the old troll. "What can the next one do?"

"I have heard so much about Norway," said the fifth elf-daughter, "that the only husband I will ever have must be Norwegian."